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ABSTRACT

According to this paper, in private schools where parents make up the corporation and board of trustees, both administrators and trustees face particular problems and considerations. The paper attempts to deal with those problems, with an emphasis on the development of cooperative working relations among students, teachers, administrators, trustees, parents, and community residents. The first section deals with the board and the trustee, offering advice on clear definitions of role structure, trustee function, and awareness about the school. The section on the trustee and parents deals with the tension between representation of parents and personal or professional beliefs, the necessity for the board to keep others informed, and parent activities. Section three discusses relations between the board and the head and the difference between their personal investments in the school. The section on the trustee and the faculty highlights hiring, firing, and communication. Relationships and communication with students are also highlighted. Final chapters deal with money, authority, and relationships with the community. (Author/JM)

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NOTES ON TRUSTEESHIP

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Preface

This paper attempts to deal, in a slightly different way from the NAIS Independent School Trustee Handbook, with some of the problems and considerations of schools where parents constitute the corporation and board of trustees, and where the school is concerned with developing cooperative working relations among its students, teachers, administrators, trustees, and parents--and with the community outside.

To Francis Parkman and John Chandler, of NAIS, who made the publication of this paper possible, and to the hundreds of parents, teachers, trustees, and students whose activities inspired it--thanks!

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THE BOARD AND THE TRUSTEE

Structure

It is of primary importance to the successful functioning of any independent school that the structure, role, policies, and operating procedures of the board of trustees be clearly defined and understood by all the school's constituent groups, including--most especially--the trustees themselves.

That there is wide variety among independent schools in the makeup of boards, the methods of selecting trustees, the nature and extent of a board's involvement with the operation of the school, and so on, is made abundantly clear in the Trustee Handbook, where all these matters are treated in depth. The basic importance of definition and understanding stressed here is also stressed there. In the case of the parent-owned school, the point deserves special emphasis.

For no member of the school family is this understanding more essential than a new board member. It is vital that the new trustee be fully informed, preferably before election, of how this particular board functions, in this particular school, and in relation to this particular school head. It is a disservice to the newly elected trustee to let him or her think that the board's relation to the head and the faculty is other than it really is.

Function

Boards work in different ways. Some only set financial policy. Some set both financial and educational policy, either by helping the head of the

school develop one or both or by standing back and letting the head and his staff operate to the best of their ability.

Boards are usually divided into various formal and informal committees that perform specific tasks and report to the board and to its constituencies. The school's administration, faculty, parents, and, in some cases, students ought to be kept abreast of the board's activities and concerns. One way of doing this is to have constituents take part in writing the board's agenda so that their concerns may be considered with their prior knowledge and direction.

Awareness

Most groups, boards included, tend to condense into an inner circle--the executive committee, perhaps, or the "old parents"--and an outer circle--members who, for whatever reason, find themselves "the last to know." Sometimes they feel left out because the board is not dealing with their particular concerns. In such a case, the board might well review its committee structure to see whether the special talents or interests of these members might be better employed. Some boards tend to make men the financial officers and women the socializers and parent-activities organizers. Other boards make it a point to avoid this kind of division.

Board members must know their school well--its strengths and its weaknesses--especially when trustees are parents and live nearby. The school and the outer community expect a trustee to be knowledgeable about, and frequently accountable for, whatever happens inside the school. Setting aside occasions for board members to visit the school are probably of limited use. Of far more use is having trustees work, even briefly, at the school: volunteering to teach a couple of classes,

or even a course, acting as parent guides, helping in the office, or substituting. Not all schools may be able to do all these things, but if the trustees and the school's faculty both feel it important that their board have a sense of how the school operates, then some way might be found.

The school will suffer from acute nearsightedness if at least some of its trustees are not able or interested enough to see their school in some larger social, educational, or economic context. In the absence of such a larger vision, the school can easily become merely a refuge for certain selected people to take shelter against the hostile realities of the World Out There and gradually stagnate.

THE TRUSTEE AND THE PARENTS

Representation

However the school may be set up in terms of ownership and ultimate financial responsibility, the elected trustee in some ways represents the larger parent body. He is therefore responsible to parents as well as to the rest of the school and the outside community. In such a position, the trustee may have to wrestle with a conflict between what he may feel professionally is right or needed, what he may feel as a parent, and what he may understand the parent body to feel. There is certainly no hard and fast rule about how to solve this dilemma, but it does help for the trustee to be clear to himself and to his fellow trustees about how he feels and to be able to discuss the conflict in as much detail as necessary.

There is the further (and we hope rare) dilemma of the trustee who finds himself objecting to some or all of the school's program or direction.

While parents and friends who serve on the board must be supportive, they must at the same time be allowed and encouraged to voice their reservations and objections within the board itself. At this difficult stage it is tempting for the board to retreat into closed sessions, but it is worth the effort to keep deliberations and discussions as open as possible for as long as possible, for paranoid feelings on the part of parents (and trustees, heads, and teachers) can be very close to the surface.

Communication

The board and its individual members have a duty and need to keep the rest of the school community informed about what they are up to and which way the ball will bounce. At the same time they have to keep themselves informed about what their constituency is thinking. Regular newsletters to parents from the head and from the board, perhaps even combined, can be helpful, as can different kinds of meetings.

Although it may not be possible to reach every parent (there are always some who don't want to be involved or even informed), the trustee must take on the job of board-school communication as one of his major concerns. He should look for ways, through meetings, newsletters, and activities, to convey the message that parents are "wanted" (frequently the school's message comes across as just the opposite). A school's survival may well depend immediately and ultimately on parent support: their words in the community, and their labors and contributions of other kinds within the school.

Parent complaints are a touchy area for the trustee. Some parents seek out one or more trustees who seem receptive to complaints. Dealing with these parents can become a problem in many

ways. Probably the best way to handle the situation is to direct the parent to the teacher, supervisor, or head with the reassurance that, if nothing is done or no solutions are proposed, the trustees will take up the matter with the head. In any case, the trustees should all agree on what procedure they will follow and then stick to it. Problems of trustee response to parent criticism should be brought up immediately, either by the trustees or by the head. If not dealt with cleanly, this can be a really corrosive problem.

Work

There is usually a great deal of work to be done in schools where parents play some part beyond simply paying tuition and where funds are generally low. Some schools have a kind of PTA, where parent activities are seen as being separate from school policy. Others manage to run various parent activities from the board level. Still others enlist the faculty and student body as participants.

A productive education committee meeting, an informative finance committee meeting, or a day for groups of parents and teachers to visit other schools together can be just as much a school activity as any party or fund-raising gathering.

A good board will try to capitalize on the strengths of other members of the school community as well as on its own. "Take them where they are" applies to more than just a classroom of students.

THE TRUSTEE AND THE HEAD

Board-head relations

Just as the position of the trustee in the board can

vary from school to school, so can the relation of the board to the head of the school. Unless chains of command, spheres of influence, and various levels of authority are clearly understood--which can probably never be fully the case--it is important for the board and the head to deal with each other in ways that allow each room for movement and recovery.

If either side is truly interested in finding the facts in a situation, and then in working together to develop a solution, each must try to avoid an attacking position ("Why haven't you . . .?" "How can you allow . . .?" "If you'd only . . ."). Such attitudes only produce a defensive reaction, not objectivity or cooperation. Attempts to share a vision, a definition, are far more helpful ("The way I see it is . . ." "How do you see it?"). The group can restate the problem in a variety of ways, which can then suggest a variety of solutions.

Urgent adherence to the items on an agenda and to the terms in which they are presented can easily lead to a sense of panic and being boxed in. An atmosphere of possibilities and alternatives, of freedom to move and recover, is helpful in every situation that involves people and authority, whether in board meetings, faculty meetings, or the classroom.

Personal investments

Both the trustees and the head should remember that the nature of their personal investment in the school differs. Although the trustees may be parents, and even fairly closely involved with the life of the school, they cannot be around as much as the head and the faculty, and so they need help in keeping informed about the school and its operation.

Some boards, or perhaps certain trustees. will want more information about finances, or about the philosophy of finances, or about teachers, program, or philosophy of education; others will care most about the food service. The school will benefit greatly from time spent in providing this information.

Outside consultants can be helpful in getting information that is hard for the school community to come by and in transmitting it to whatever segment may be having trouble getting it.

Finally, since the trustees are, in whatever degree specified by the school's charter or by-laws, ultimately responsible for the school, they depend on the head to carry on without their direct supervision. The head, on the other hand, feels that the working of the school is more his responsibility, and is proud or defensive according to how well it goes. It is his full-time job; his trustees mostly all have other areas of concern as well--their lives and jobs in the community.

THE TRUSTEE AND THE FACULTY

Responsibility

Teachers should be hired and fired in accordance with the school's by-laws. Relations between a head and his staff are heavily influenced by the way hiring and firing are done, and by the part the board plays, if any.

Some boards review faculty candidates, some are satisfied to hear credentials. Some leave the matter entirely up to the head and his staff and the budget. The more completely a head can be responsible for choosing the faculty, the better he is likely to work with them, and the clearer their

position in the school is likely to be.

Once a teacher is hired, the board must be careful to work through and not around the head. As long as the teacher is employed by the school, the trustees must support him and work for whatever improvement is needed through the board room. Some schools manage smoothly where trustees deal directly with faculty members, while others only go through the front office. Whichever method is used, both trustees and head should take frequent readings to make sure that nobody is getting left out or trampled in the process.

Teachers' welfare should be a serious concern of a board. The faculty should know immediately of board efforts to improve their salaries or benefits--or of obstacles to so doing. It is better to take steps to improve conditions before active dissatisfaction sets in.

Faculty members who are actively interested in the school's finances can often give valuable help in working out financial binds and in balancing difficult priorities. Both the board and the school as a whole will benefit from treating the faculty as respected professionals whose investment in the school, though different from theirs, may be just as great.

Communication

The smaller the school and the closer the community it serves, the more likely there is to be direct communication between trustees and teachers, whether as trustees, as parents, or as social friends and acquaintances. Some schools formalize these occasions by having faculty members serve on board committees, on the board itself, or in various parent activities. Such relationships can be enormously profitable on both sides, enabling trustees--and

teachers--to see their school from a point of view neither the head's nor their own.

Such relations, especially the more informal ones, can also be very touchy, and every effort should be made not to pull the rug out from under the head of the school. The temptation to "just level with each other" is very great--the attraction of shared inside knowledge can be overpowering--but building certain kinds of confidences puts both teacher and trustee in ultimately untenable positions.

The trustee wears at least two hats: a managerial hat and a parent-friend hat. The teacher also wears two: a teacher hat and an employee hat. The relation gets even more complicated if the trustee also teaches, whether at the same school or another, and if the teacher is a parent--and if both are friends outside of school. Forethought and discretion are vital.

THE TRUSTEE AND THE STUDENTS

Responsibility

To read the charter or by-laws of some schools is to get the impression that the students simply do not exist, except perhaps as assets (enrollment), liabilities (problems), or cash flow (net enrollments or suspensions). Some boards (and teachers too, unfortunately) seem to view students primarily as a problem without which the school would no doubt function more smoothly.

The student view of the board can be equally myopic: the trustees are simply Them, who spend too little time at school, and less money. But because students can be a real asset in many ways, the board would do well to consider them. Apart from parents, students are the best advertisement for the school,

both within and without. Their views of the school and its workings, which frequently differ from those of the head, the faculty, or their parents, can provide valuable insight into possible solutions for difficult school situations. Students can provide insight into their own needs--personal, educational, and architectural--and into the needs of the school as a whole. And on the other side, the trustees can provide the students with insight into the over-all operation of the institution, the reason for some of their actions and decisions, and their planning for the future.

Communication

Some schools have moved clearly in the direction of closer connections between old and young: students appear on boards, board committees, and at faculty meetings. Because the need to know what is happening to and among young people outside the immediate environment of the school grows daily, the board should keep in close touch with what is going on. But again, the personal investment of the trustee and the student are different. The trustee is responsible in some way for what happens to the student, what will happen to the student, and what will happen to the school, and he spends a very different kind of time on school business.

Too few trustees see themselves as being actively involved in learning (perhaps true of students, too!). While students spend the bulk of their time in school, for many it is not their whole life and their only concern, and their interest in the school may be very different from what the trustee imagines it to be or might like it to be.

THE TRUSTEE AND MONEY

Responsibility

Finances are one of the trustee's major concerns. It is tempting to restrict the purview of a board to money matters. Even though the financial condition of a school is not independent of its internal health and growth, a dollar-dominated board is a poor one. Having an effective, convincing finance committee, annual giving committee, or similar other financial committee enables the board as a whole to focus at least some of its time on matters of education and the larger social context in which the school operates.

The financial decisions of a board that is known to be actively interested in, knowledgeable about, and involved in education are likely to be better balanced and more acceptable to the rest of the community. Too often a polarization over money occurs wherein the board is seen as financially tight-fisted at the expense of the welfare of the school and the school is seen as financially ignorant, perhaps even bordering on the irresponsible. The head, faculty, parents, and perhaps even some of the students have a joint responsibility to understand and appreciate the financial considerations that face the board.

The budget

The clearest statement of a board's priorities is the budget. Although it is a financial statement on the surface, it is more significantly an educational one and is interpreted as such. Decisions about financial aid or tuition reduction, for instance, can have a powerful effect on the composition of the student body, the direction of the school's program, the relation of the school to the community, and the morale of the faculty. Attempts to reduce

expenses by cutting faculty or program or equipment show areas of concern or lack of it more clearly than any number of meetings and reports.

Some schools develop their budget within the finance committee of the board, others do it in the front office, and others do it as a sort of group enterprise. Whatever the method, the more information about the needs and aspirations of the school that people at the school can provide, the more happily will the budget be received and administered. Few faculties--or student bodies--have much chance to see the budget while it is being prepared, and not all are interested.

While it generally seems in the board's interest to save money and in the school's to spend it, every effort should be made to avoid an annual digging-in on these two positions. The trustees might very well take a position on saving within budget items: savings in one might be applied to another, or to the next year's division of funds. It is disheartening to see small savings in some one area of the budget go to mortgage reduction or to offset the annual deficit, where they disappear without a trace. The annual battle about turning out the lights in empty classrooms might fade away if it were established that any reduction in the electric bill could be applied, for instance, to school supplies or athletic equipment.

THE TRUSTEE AND AUTHORITY

Patterns

A simple "factory" view of authority is the chain of command, where each level depends for its orders, and ultimately for its motivation, reward, and evaluation, on the level above. What happens at the top is much less clear. The buck passes

easily in this system, but along the way there are often problems--problems of motivation, interest, and responsibility. Authority can be shared in many ways, but how this is done is important. Advisory groups, nonvoting members of groups, suggestion boxes--all these may be valid sources of information, but they are not ways of sharing authority and must not be presented as such.

Today's student, parent, teacher, school head, and trustee are more concerned about real authority --Power--than they used to be. They may not necessarily be interested in it for themselves; rather, they may want simply to provide a more equable and workable distribution of responsibilities and accompanying powers. If authority is to be shared in some real way, its lines and areas should be made clear, and the decisions once farmed out must be left farmed out, with no attempt to influence or limit them. Only real authority is rich enough to give itself away. Real delegation, whether done by a board, a trustee, a head, or a teacher, is a sign of strength, self-confidence, and self-esteem.

Delegation and control

To delegate authority is to yield some measure of control. Yet the oft-stated goal of schools, for the students, at least, is to make them somehow independent, self-motivated, self-directing. The board should seriously discuss whether these goals are real for the students and whether they should apply to the staff and to themselves as well. Much school management tends in the opposite direction, insisting so heavily on the development of certain skills or attitudes or qualifications, all under direct supervision, that independence of thought or attitude--or even skills--seems impossible. But how can students enjoy some degree of independence and self-motivation if staff and administration, and perhaps even trustees, do not enjoy some of the same?

The degree of self-control and self-motivation in a school can be measured, in part, by seeing what happens in an emergency, when the regular schedule and supervision break down. Education itself can be at least partially measured "in the eating" by what the group or individual does when nobody is watching, when there are no implied goals in a situation being worked toward at the moment. In the best and most practical sense, the best control for an individual as well as for his organization is self-control, a skill that cannot be taught unless it is allowed to happen. Direct control and supervision must to some extent be lifted if this is to occur. The degree and manner depend on the school and the circumstances--but in schools where these goals are taken seriously, steps toward yielding authority must be equally serious, and not just be given lip service.

One method is the group decision, with the makeup of the group and the areas of decision to be determined within the school. Groups can either be made up of people who all play the same role, or they can consist of people in differing roles (anyone who is concerned about the issue, for instance).

Another method is delegating a decision within specified limits, as in the case where faculty members are invited to vote on the hiring of a new teacher but not on the rehiring of present teachers.

A third method is to use some outside source, consultant, or authority. But it is demoralizing for a school to work seriously with a professional visitor and then have nothing come of it.

Any movement toward change or improvement must be a real one: members who have been asked for their opinion, time, and effort will go away angry and disillusioned if nothing is done as a result. It is all very well to say, "Work within the

system for change"; the system then has an obligation to make some clearly observable, positive response to this work.

Pressure

Newton stated that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. One cannot exert force when there is no resistance. "Exerting authority" and "applying pressure" suggest resistance, objection, ultimately threats and confrontation and pulling rank. It is important for the authority figures in a school, or any organization, to be aware of the extent to which they really do possess authority, consciously or not, and of the degree to which it actually threatens others. For instance, where the head has the sole power to fire a teacher, his relation with his staff cannot be entirely egalitarian, and it is false to pretend that it is. Similarly, a board of trustees may have that power over the head, and in times of crisis both sides should deal fairly with that power. Criticisms should be clear and open and should be made in plenty of time to be helpful.

Authority does not necessarily imply pressure or force. Others can be influenced by example, by inspiration, by encouragement, by selective reinforcement. The effectiveness of judo is its reliance on the strength and momentum of the opponent. In a very real sense, one's opponent becomes an ally.

Personal investment

The pattern of authority, power, evaluation, and responsibility tends to narrow one's point of view. The authority figure can concentrate so hard on his statement of goals, his methods, his evaluation of results, and his ensuing decisions for future action--all the essence of his job--that he can no

longer be objective about what is happening. Newspapers are full of the twistings and turnings of officials who cannot change course, admit even temporary failure, or proceed on a different or better course. This is part of what learning is all about; it is unfortunate that so few of our students, teachers, administrators, and trustees seem to take that message to heart.

The personal investment in a program of action increases the more the program is not shared ("It's mine, and mine alone, for better or worse!") and when it comes under attack. Others will be more likely to attack it when they feel no part of it themselves. So the need for mutual support, especially at the beginning of a development, is very great. To let someone get out on a limb and then make him a scapegoat is all too common a practice at all levels of an organization, and schools are no exception.

THE TRUSTEE AND THE COMMUNITY

The school community

While the relation of the trustee to various sections of the school community has been touched on, some mention must be made of his place in the community as a whole. Problems arise from an overnarrow view, where the trustee considers himself primarily a parent, a part of the school administration, or a spokesman for one group of parents (parents of black students, of kindergartners, "new parents," "the conservative branch"). In point of fact, the trustee is a member of the group that is ultimately responsible for the educational, legal, and financial stability and growth of the school as well as for its image among the parents and the outside community, for the sense among its members that their welfare is being considered--and considered in ways that are clear, significant, and approachable.

The local community

The trustee and the board must be continuously aware of the larger community outside the school's walls. The liabilities and assets of this local community are reflected within the school itself, and the way they are dealt with in the community has some bearing on how they appear inside.

It is futile to pretend that the school can be a tabula rasa on which anything can be inscribed; the students, and their parents and teachers bring all their own problems with them, together with the solutions and attitudes toward solutions that the outside community favors. The trustee should remember that how problems are stated and then solved can often be more instructive and productive than the solutions themselves.

A prime--and often unconsidered--question for a school to face is the degree to which it can, should, or wants to depart from local standards. This can in turn lead to productive discussion about what exactly the local standards are. Students can be very useful here. A related question involves how much the school wants to depart from local educational standards, which raises the question of the school's educational leadership in the community and opens up a whole new area of school-community relations.

The national community and beyond

Involvement of schools, their students, staffs, and parents with national issues has grown rapidly in the last decade, attended by legal issues. Questions of teacher and administrative bias, of teacher and student rights, matters of race and sex and academic freedom, now come more often to the courts and to the newspapers.

Trustees--and the rest of the school membership--might do well to consider some of these issues before they are faced with some apparently insoluble confrontation. State and national developments in school- and teacher-certification requirements pose another series of potential traps that require vigilance. Schools are often accused of having their heads in the sand, of being ingrown. The trustee, with one foot in the school and the other Out There, is the most natural agent for the consideration of these increasingly serious issues.

Change

Many schools seem organized with eternity in mind: they seem to be everlasting. The evolutionary aspect of education, behavior, and society at large needs to be recognized and somehow dealt with. Some institutions make a serious and desperate concession to change only under extreme provocation or threat.

To ensure the long life and health of a school, trustees need continuously to evaluate the status quo and to assist in developing the human forces in cases where they seem opposed. Whether the decision is to move ahead, to stand still and consolidate, or to look back for some historical solution, it requires a stable and supportive platform. Perhaps the most necessary task for a board is to develop and maintain such a platform.